No Rest for the Weary

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No Rest for the Weary

by Wafflesssss

Summary

Dick, Jason, and Tim were kids when Bruce faked his death and abandoned them in a burning building. Jason and Tim were kids when they reunited and set out together to repair their lives. They were still kids when all three learned that their adopted father was not only alive, but Batman.

Fast forward through a lot of pain, a bullet in the Joker's head, two new siblings, and a new life.

Three years later, Tim is still a kid, one who hasn't shaken off the trauma of killing a man. Jason is nineteen and legally dead, unsure what to do with his life outside of the Red Hood. Dick is twenty two and hiding Bruce's attempts at contacting him from the rest of the family. They, along with Cass and Damian, are still unsure where they fit in a life they never thought they'd have. Added to that is the stress of their second lives as the vigilantes protecting Bludhaven's streets.

But, as the little family will soon find out, you can't best the Bat and live unbothered. Other heroes are curious about this group, who not only won a fight with Batman, but killed his greatest rival. They have questions.

Notes

I'M BACK BABY

(This will not be receiving daily updates as school is repeatedly kicking my ass but I'll do my best lol)

Chapter 1: Little Bird, Unravelling

Dick and Jason should really know Tim better by now. If they did, they'd know he wasn't *that* easily dissuaded from doing what he wanted to. It was just that it was easier to do it sneakily when they thought he was being good.

That being said, guilt still twinged in Tim's gut as he pulled himself up through the warehouse's window, camera bag hanging securely from his neck.

Tim had over three years as Specter, the Birds' resident eyes and ears, under his belt. And that was fine. It was great, in fact, except Jason and Dick were *deeply* against him being anything else. Over those same three years, Tim had been training. He could outmatch any of his family, minus Cass, with a bo. Hand to hand was a little more difficult, but he was more than capable in that area too. He'd even been beating Damian in fights, though that was partially because they'd reached the point where Dami didn't respond to failure with murderous rage.

By all accounts, Tim was more than qualified to join his brothers and sister as Bludhaven's protectors. Cass agreed with him, which should have made the decision itself. But Jason and Dick said no, and seeing as they were the de facto leaders of their little family, that closed the matter.

As far as a matter could be closed with Tim's level of persistence. He hadn't let the matter drop in the two months since he'd first been shut down. He'd used everything he could think of to persuade them: reasoning, arguing, PowerPoints, even flat out pleading(which lasted about ten seconds before his dignity won out). Nothing worked.

Jason and Dick insisted they didn't think he was ready for the field. It was bullshit. There was some other reason, but Tim couldn't figure it out. If he couldn't figure it out, he couldn't argue against it.

So, instead, he did what he wanted without asking permission.

Four years ago, the Obeah Man killed Tim's parents. He and his brothers hadn't saved them because, at the time, Tim had been stuck in Arkham Asylum as part of Batman's plan to stomp out their team's beginning. Just another item on the laundry list of reasons that the Birds had left Gotham for Bludhaven and cut off their former father

figure.

After killing the Drakes, the Obeah Man had been allowed to fade back into the shadows. Despite their best interests, Tim's family had been unable to locate him. It had seemed that he'd escaped until a few days ago, when Tim caught wind of two of the Obeah Man's known associates making contact in Bludhaven.

A few years ago, he would have taken it to Jason and Dick immediately. That was before he spent months being turned down for a position he fully deserved. Instead, Tim had stolen a domino and thrown on some dark clothes before sneaking out to the docks, collapsible bo in hand. He could handle this himself.

Inside the warehouse, Tim found himself on a catwalk, lying on his stomach and looking down at what seemed to be some sort of business meeting. Why couldn't these people discuss shady business over burgers like normal people?

Oh, right. They were shady.

A draft blew through the upper areas of the warehouse, but Tim's jacket kept him warm. It was a gift from Dick, black leather with a blue stripe near the bottom. Though neither one had said it out loud, they knew it was a replacement for the one Tim's parents threw out. That still hurt a little when Tim let himself think about it, so he shook it off now and shifted forward, pulling out his camera.

The lens wasn't exactly like the contacts Jason, Dick, and Damian wore. Tim certainly didn't have a…well, a *Specter* behind the scenes enhancing the feed for him, but he made do. Lifting the camera to his eye, he zoomed in as far as he could to get a look at the men's faces.

Given that the view was still shit, Tim would have to check his predictions against his database later, but for now, he was pretty sure that he was looking at Mitchell Dawes and Keith Fay, two high level players in human trafficking. They were some of the most connected people in the criminal underground, and were owed more favors than they'd ever done for anyone. In other words, they were monsters.

Tim snapped a few photos and started to move. He needed to get closer to hear what they were talking about, and if it connected to the Obeah Man. If he was back, this was Tim's chance to get justice for his parents. If he got through this little eavesdropping session, maybe Jason and Dick would see that he could be in the field after all.

He never got the chance. Before he'd gotten more than a few yards away from the window he came through, Fay pulled a gun from beneath his coat and shot Dawes in the head.

Dawes didn't have time to make a sound. He was dead before his muscles went lax, dead before he fell from the chair, dead before he landed, face lolling towards Tim—looking straight at him. Empty green eyes stare into Tim's blue, and suddenly—suddenly, Tim was looking at a different body altogether.

Dick had tried to keep him from looking, but it was too late. You don't forget the way someone looks after you killed them. Tim remembered everything about the Joker from that moment, from the blank eyes to the bit of drool spilling down his chin.

There couldn't be a gun in his hands. Tim hadn't brought a gun to the warehouse, but he could feel the weight of it, even though his hands were pressed together, trying to warm up because it was *cold* , just like the drafty halls of Arkham.

It was like falling with his feet firmly on the floor. Tim couldn't think straight. He couldn't cast his awareness around him to hear, or feel, or do anything but stare at Dawes-Joker's dead eyes, trapped in memories.

"—three, four, good, now out, one, two, three, four."

Someone was guiding him through a breathing exercise. They weren't touching Tim, but they were close, close enough to be tapping a rhythm on the metal railing by Tim's ear.

Tim followed the voice's instructions. Breathing in, holding, breathing out. Slowly, he came back to his body, which had ended up sitting, hunched against the catwalk's railing with hands clenched together around bent knees. God, that was embarrassing. Cheeks flushed, Tim looked around for the person who'd helped him—

Fuck.

Dick, in his Aegis gear, was crouched down next to him, still tapping that rhythm out on the railing. Relief flashed through his eyes when Tim made eye contact, though he looked away quickly. "Can you hear me, Spec?"

Tim nodded wordlessly.

“Awesome. You want a hug?”

Yes, Tim did want a hug. But he was sixteen, and he’d lost enough dignity already from the panic attack. He shook his head.

Dick definitely wasn’t buying it, but he didn’t force the matter. “Hood and Mockingbird are taking care of the traffickers,” he said instead, making no mention of the fact that Tim snuck out to find said traffickers alone. Tim tried to ask why, but the words evaporated on his tongue.

Sure enough, Jason’s low voice floated up from the warehouse’s main area, accompanied by Damian’s higher, mildly angrier one. There were no combative sounds, so the fight must be over. That made sense. Dawes and Fay hadn’t brought much in the way of security.

Tim and Dick waited in silence for Jason and Damian to grapple up to their level. Immediately, Jason rushed to Tim, looking him over for injuries he obviously didn’t have. Damian stood back, arms crossed judgmentally. He’d…mellowed, over the past three years, in most aspects of life. Those aspects did not include vigilantism. In that area, Damian was as stubborn and perfectionistic as ever. Tim couldn’t blame him, but he also was not excited for the berating he would get later. Most likely, the only reason he wasn’t getting it now was because Jason and Dick were worried.

Finally satisfied that Tim was unscathed, Jason straightened up and offered a hand. “We’re going home.”

Tim stood up alone, signing, “Patrol?”

“Patrol’s done for the night,” Dick said. “We need to get you home.”

“We also need to talk about this,” Jason added. He and Dick had really perfected the good cop, bad cop routine over the last few years.

Tim very much did *not* want to talk about this, but that was the price of getting caught. He followed his brothers outside to the waiting bikes. It was a small victory that he still got to ride behind Jason while Damian had to take Dick’s sidecar. Climbing on the seat, he allowed himself a small smirk in response to Damian’s scowl.

It took ten minutes to get back to their house, as opposed to the thirty minute trip by bus/taxi/walking that Tim had taken. When they got inside, Damian disappeared into the basement, while Jason and Dick shed their masks and turned to Tim.

“Alright, baby bird. You want to tell us why you snuck out without saying anything?” Jason asked, arms folded over his chest. He wasn’t mad. That wasn’t his mad face. But that didn’t stop Tim from being defensive.

This time, when Tim tried to speak, the words flowed. “Would you have let me go if I did?”

“Tim, you know why we don’t want you to go out,” Dick said.

“No, I don’t! You’re worrying too much about things that aren’t that big of a deal.” Tim crossed his arms. The domino was still on his face. It was starting to feel obtrusive, too much on his skin. How did Dick and Damian wear these all night?

“You had a panic attack back there,” Jason said. “I know you want to pretend they’re not happening, Tim, but they are. They’re going to get worse if you don’t acknowledge them.”

Tim glared. “I’m *fine* .” The panic attacks were fine. He had them under control. He had everything under control, and he didn’t need more help. He had a civilian therapist and his family. That was enough.

Cass appeared from the kitchen, two mugs in her hands. For all they knew, she could’ve been there the whole time. She also could have just gotten back from massacring a supermarket. With her silence, none of them would know the difference. She passed a mug to Tim and turned, placing herself a little to the side between him and the other two. Her eyes flicked back and forth between them all, no doubt analyzing body language Tim had no hope of noticing to piece together a more accurate picture. She set her mug on the table against the wall by the door and signed, “Wrong. Hurting.”

For two words, they packed a punch. They packed even more of a punch because Cass was right. But of course Tim was hurting. They were all hurt. People who weren’t hurt didn’t do what Tim’s family did.

He’d asked his therapist about this. What it was okay to talk about with people who weren’t licensed to help you, how far you could go before you hurt them. It turned out you could talk about a lot. But family and friends weren’t equipped to help you with the heavy stuff, like nightmares about shooting everyone from the Joker to Cass, or feeling like you were floating through the motions of life when something hit your brain wrong. That was for therapists and doctors.

They all had things they didn't talk about. Jason didn't talk about being tortured. Dick didn't talk about Bruce stealing Robin. Cass and Damian didn't talk about being raised by assassins. Tim didn't talk about killing the Joker. Some things weren't meant for family to fix. That was therapy's job; but Tim's therapist wasn't allowed to know that he was a vigilante, or that he used to be one of the closest things Bruce Wayne had to a son, or that he'd killed the man who killed his brother.

What do you do when you can't talk to any of your supports about something that's eating you alive? You keep it inside and wait for disaster.

Tim redoubled his glare, which wouldn't do much. They were used to Damian. "So what? I say I'm handling it. That's good enough."

"It's not good enough if you're having panic attacks on the regular." Jason stepped closer. His hair was sticking up in all directions from his helmet, including the white chunk in his bangs that started growing last year. "We can find a way to help you, baby bird. You just need to let us."

"I don't want *help* ." Tim spat the word out like it offended him. Maybe it had. They were all acting like Tim wasn't capable of taking care of himself, like he hadn't spent years on his own before they were reunited.

Distraction from the helpless expressions on Jason and Dick's faces came in the form of a small scoff from the top of the stairs.

Damian had changed from his suit to an all black combination of sweater and shorts. It was the kind of outfit one would expect from a normal thirteen year old, and the complete lack of color added some personal flair. Not that Tim and his 90% gray wardrobe could judge.

Arms crossed, Damian joined their little group. "Drake, you are a fool."

"Wow." Tim drew out the word so there was no way Damian could miss the sarcasm. The jab got him sharp looks from Jason and Dick, but he didn't really care. "Thank you for the insightful observations, Dami. Can you explain how that's helpful to this conversation?"

"It's not." So much for playing off condescension, since Damian had apparently learned not to take the bait, and—what was Tim doing? Trying to figure out the best way to hurt a kid's feelings? Christ, what

was wrong with him? “I simply think you should know you’re a fool. If you don’t accept Richard and Jason’s help, you will never be allowed into the field. It’s very simple, really.”

“Thank you for that explanation. I’ll be sure to think it over. By the way, how’s therapy going?” Damian stiffened. “Oh, right. You’re refusing to go. Maybe you should take your own advice.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Dick stepped between Tim and Damian. Now he was angry. “Tim, that wasn’t necessary and you know it.”

Tim did know it. Regret was already worming its way through his gut, cold and scaly. He fixed his gaze on the ground. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Damian made a *tch* sound. Tim’s eyes flicked up. The younger boy was still standing ramrod straight, but he’d crossed his arms. One eyebrow had risen. The condescension it implied relit Tim’s already very short fuse. An explosion was imminent, and he couldn’t afford to take anyone else down with him.

He spun and stormed off to his room, ignoring Dick calling his name. He locked the door behind him and sank to the floor, clenching his teeth over a scream.

“Fuck,” he whispered, a sharp, punched-out sound. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck* .” The gray carpet prickled against his skin, made of short, wiry fibers that Tim usually wore socks to avoid. Now, he pressed his arm down into them, trying to ground himself with the sensation.

What’s wrong with me?

He didn’t know. That wasn’t even the scary part.

The scary part was that he didn’t know how to fix it.

Chapter 2: Lonely Bird, Pressure

Chapter Notes

Behold: Chapter

No CW's for this chapter

The roof was nice. The shingles were a slightly different texture from the concrete, a little less like gravel and a little more like sandpaper. They were rough against Dick's hands where he braced them to hold himself up, face tipped skyward.

The sky in Bludhaven was…not exactly clearer than Gotham. It had the same pollution, the same layers of trapped emissions clouding the sky until only the brightest stars could shine through. Still, it was lighter in a way Dick couldn't describe. Gotham was a sad city, and the weather seemed to sense that. Dick had always gotten the feeling that the environment didn't want people to be happy.

He chuckled humorlessly to himself. That would be Gotham. Home to misery, pain, and the Bat.

The Bat, who'd been trying to contact Dick for over a month.

It was phone calls first. Caller ID Unknown, they said, but Dick had known the moment Bruce spoke. The first time it happened, he'd slammed the end call button before he even had time to process what was going on and threw the phone across the room, breathing hard. Thank fuck the others were out grocery shopping. Dick had stayed behind to finish an assignment for college. That had fallen to the wayside in the wake of this new problem.

He'd prayed that it was a one time incident, but the calls kept coming, and Dick eventually stopped answering any call that wasn't in his contacts.

Because Bruce couldn't leave well enough alone, letters then started showing up. Addressed to Dick, and Dick alone.

Dick had considered telling the others. He really had. But the messages seemed contained to him, and as long as Bruce kept to remote contact, he'd be fine. He could spend the rest of his life trashing the letters and ignoring the phone calls if it kept his family

from worrying.

Never mind that his grades were slipping. Never mind that he couldn't sleep at night. Never mind that it was making it difficult to talk to everyone, to the point that Dick had started having anxiety attacks at the idea of them finding out. Those were Dick's problems. He could handle them.

Dick leaned back on the roof, folding his hands under his head. The cool autumn air soothed his mind. When upset, Jason and Damian tended to bundle themselves up in blankets. They sought comfort from warmth. Tim and Cass didn't like to let other people see them vulnerable, but they were getting better at it.

For his part, Dick liked being cold. The chill sinking into his bones grounded him. It reminded him of the nights he spent whispering his secrets on Gotham's rooftops, unprotected from the city's elements.

He didn't want to go back to them. That was for sure. It was just that Dick knew what he was doing back then. Now, he had to figure out how to live all over again. It was exhausting.

That said, he wouldn't give it up for anything. He had his brothers back, and he'd gotten Damian and Cass too. He loved his family. It just felt just things were slipping, lately.

Dick blew out a long breath, watching it billow through the air in a cloud of vapor. This was too depressing. He pushed himself to his feet and climbed back to the edge of the roof, sliding back into the house through his window.

His room was messy. The clothes he threw at the laundry basket never quite reached, and so they'd piled up around it instead. A small mountain of homework waited on his desk beside his laptop, screensaver running.

Downstairs, Dick could hear the kettle steaming. With all that had happened, Tim probably couldn't sleep.

In their house, there was an unspoken rule to ignore sounds from the living areas at night. Sometimes people needed space to breathe, and they'd seek comfort if they wanted it. Still, Dick had to restrain himself from going out there. Tim was mad at him. He wouldn't want Dick's comfort.

Letting out a long sigh, Dick threw himself face down onto the

unmade bed. The events of that afternoon began running through his head again, and he tried to imagine a way he could have fixed it.

Maybe he could have made Tim stay, but forcing Tim into uncomfortable situations was the fastest way to lose his trust. Maybe he could have stopped Damian sooner, but the younger boy would have been upset if he felt ignored. Maybe he should have just let Jason handle it, but Jason had a habit of taking Tim's side. Even three years later, he remembered what Damian did to their little brother. Not that Dick had forgotten. But they were all trying to move past that.

And Jason *was* trying. But for the boy who had scars from the crowbar that killed him, the pink tissue on Tim's thigh would always be a reminder of what could have happened.

Ugh. Everything was too complicated. Dick indulged in a long, quiet groan as he slid a hand beneath his pillow, pulling out the envelope hidden there. He propped himself up on his elbows to read it.

Richard Grayson

4323 Rose Avenue

Bludhaven, NJ

In the top right corner where the return address was supposed to be, there was a stamp depicting the Haly's Circus logo. Haly's Circus had never made stationary, so it must have been custom. Knowing that Bruce was one of the only people alive who remembered his backstory would be damning enough to this letter, but the final straw was the edit. In one of the spotlights illuminating the stage, a bat had been carved.

Flipping the letter over, Dick ran a finger along the flap. It was sealed, no doubt with water. Alfred had always disapproved of licking them, and Bruce wouldn't give Dick any of his DNA if he could avoid it.

What could Bruce want so badly to tell Dick? The news hadn't mentioned anything out of the ordinary for Gotham, and Bruce was emotionally closed off enough that Dick had been confident he'd leave their family alone, so long as they didn't make trouble.

What if Bruce had changed? What if he was making an effort to reconcile? What if he was reaching out to Dick because he was the only one Bruce thought would open the letters, and Dick was keeping Jason and Tim and Damian away from the father figure none of them would admit they wanted—

Bzzz .

Dick jumped and dropped the letter, looking to where his phone lay face down beside the pillow. Light shone faintly against the blue quilt.

Dragging a hand through his hair, Dick picked it up. The screen showed a text from Jason:

Taking care of Tim

He'll be okay

Dick dropped the phone and let himself drop back down, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Christ," he whispered.

He knew better than this. Bruce wasn't going to change. He was the same cold, controlling asshole he was three years ago, just like he was when Dick was fifteen. He didn't change. He just wanted something.

Well, Dick wasn't going to be the one to give it to him.

He texted Jason a thank you and shoved the letter back under his pillow.

They didn't need Bruce. *Dick* didn't need Bruce. He curled up on his side, hands beneath his head.

Their family was okay. Dick could keep it okay. And he could keep everyone safe while he did it.

Chapter 3: Lost Bird, Therapy Time

Chapter Notes

Thing one: I am now a year older.

Thing two: NEW CHAPTER FUCK YEAH

Jason was busy not sleeping when his phone lit up with a call from Tim. Instead of picking it up, he watched. The phone buzzed once, twice, three times, before the call cut off and the screen went dark.

It was Tim's way of asking for help without words. After the disaster earlier, Jason had been expecting it.

He rolled out of bed, pulling on Dick's stolen Bludhaven University hoodie to accompany the red sweatpants he'd changed into after…that shit.

The door groaned on its hinges when he pushed it open, but Jason knew no one would come check on him. He padded down the hall in socked feet, past the closed door of Damian's room and the slightly ajar one of Tim's. Turning the corner into the kitchen, he found Tim sitting at the island, chin propped on his hands.

"Hey, baby bird," Jason said softly, going to the cabinet with the cocoa stuff. "You want hot chocolate?"

Tim nodded, and Jason pulled out the chocolate and sugar. Milk from the fridge went into a pot, the pot went on the stove, and soon chopped chocolate and sugar joined it. Jason slid into the seat next to Tim, noting as he did so that light shone from the crack beneath the basement door. Damian was training.

Rather than looking directly at him, Tim had focused vaguely on the gray countertop in front of Jason; so he could see when Jason held out his arms. He slumped into them, and Jason tugged his chair closer so he could sit more securely before wrapping his arms around his brother.

They stayed like that for a few minutes until Jason had to check the cocoa. While he poured it into mugs, putting canned whipped cream on his and two jumbo marshmallows on Tim's, he took in Tim's body language. Tim didn't usually emote in normal ways, but that didn't

make him unreadable. The unfocused look in his eyes and his unnatural stillness betrayed the fact that he was, in fact, miserable.

Jason brought the mugs back and sat, holding out an arm for Tim to lean into his side again. He began to sip at the melted marshmallow at the top of his drink, and Jason began to talk.

“No one’s mad at you, baby bird. I know everything got pretty crazy when Damian got involved,—” and it had been going *well* . As well as it could, anyway. Tim was upset, but they were going to de-escalate, but then Damian *had* to jump in and start prodding—and that was just another item on the list of issues Jason needed to figure out, “but we should’ve handled it better.”

Tim also could have not taken Damian’s bait, but that wasn’t helpful to mention now. Tim was sixteen; Damian was thirteen. They were at the prime screaming at each other age. Jason was just glad they hadn’t tried stabbing each other.

Tim didn’t move. Jason kept talking, stealing a drink of cocoa.

“What we were talking about before all that is important, too.” Tim stiffened. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, baby bird. But we have to. We don’t have to do it now. But we can’t talk about you going out with us unless we talk about this first. Alright?”

A long pause stretched through the air. Then, Tim nodded slowly. *Thank fuck* . Jason smiled, giving Tim a comforting squeeze. “Thanks, baby bird. We will talk. I promise.”

They sat for a long time, until their mugs were empty and Tim’s eyes began to close. He affectionately bumped Jason’s shoulder with his head and slid off the chair, shuffling off to his room. Uttering a soft, “good night,” Jason watched him go. Then he turned to the basement.

Tim wasn’t the only one not sleeping.

There was no chance Damian missed Jason and Tim talking, and Jason knew that he’d rather die than try to walk past any emotional conversation. He gently pushed open the basement door and descended the stairs.

Soft violin music played through the speaker in the corner, underscoring the rhythmic *thud* of fist on heavy bag. Damian, fists covered in gray wraps, repeated the same combination of *jab-jab-cross* over and over again without pause. He’d probably been doing it for

hours.

“Hey,” Jason said. Damian was the tentative exception to their privacy policy at night, only because he still hadn’t reached the point of asking for help at any time. Dick and Jason had taken to checking on him when they noticed odd behaviors. Cass did it too, on occasion; Tim had even had a talk with him once or twice. But Damian still claimed that he didn’t need help. Jason got where it came from; no one in the League asked for help. They either took care of themselves or they died.

Damian didn’t respond to Jason. He just kept hitting the bag, rhythm unchanging.

Alright, new tactic . Jason stepped up to the other side of the heavy bag and held it, keeping it in place so Damian could get at it more easily. “You have that combination down. Try something else.”

Now Damian looked at him, young face etched with indignance. He was small—shorter than Tim, though he was bulkier, built of pure muscle. Bruce’s DNA, no doubt, just as his grace came from Talia. Out of all the boys in the house, he was the only one who managed to keep his hair somewhat presentable. It was a little uncanny. He was unusually clean for a thirteen year old boy.

“I know what I’m doing, Todd,” Damian said, scowling back at the heavy bag. “I’m not five.”

Even so, his rhythm changed. Uppercuts, separated by right and left hooks. Jason nodded approvingly. “You want to tell me why you’re not asleep right now?”

A slightly harder *thwack* was his only response.

“Okay. You want me to tell you you’re not allowed to train until you get at least seven hours of sleep?”

At that, Damian stopped, devoting all his attention to melting Jason’s head with the heat of his glare. “You can’t make me.” A surprisingly childish phrase for someone so desperate to be seen as mature.

Jason shrugged. “Those are your choices, bud. We can talk, or you can go to bed. It’s a school night, remember?”

“I don’t understand why I’m required to attend school,” Damian retorted, crossing his arms. “My education in the League has far

surpassed a *sixth grade* curriculum. If anything, I should be studying in a university with Richard."

"Trust me, Dami, you don't want to go to college. It's boring as hell."

"How would you know? You've never been."

Jason pressed his lips together and forced himself to maintain eye contact. Damian didn't know how hurtful that was. He wasn't being attacked. He was just an unhappy twelve year old who wanted to avoid dealing with his own pain. "Fair point. I've got one of those too: You're deflecting."

Damian scoffed. "I don't *deflect* . Only cowards hide from their problems."

"No, they don't," Jason said. "We talked about this, Dami. It's a totally normal response, especially for kids your age." Anger flashed through Damian's eyes, and Jason could imagine the argument he was holding back, if only because it would steer them towards a conversation about the hardcore trauma he carried deep inside. That wasn't what Jason was aiming for tonight, though. "Sit down. Get some water. Take a breath."

He clearly wasn't happy about it, but Damian complied with nothing more than a heavy eye roll. Retrieving a dark green water bottle from the corner of the room, he switched off the speaker before sitting cross legged across from Jason.

Jason smiled. "Good job."

"I don't need to be praised for following instructions. I'm not a dog."

"Sometimes, Dami, people praise people for doing difficult things because they deserve it. It's a sign of love."

"Getting a water bottle isn't difficult."

"No, it's not," Jason agreed. "But taking a step towards something you know will be uncomfortable is, and you did it anyway. I'm proud of you, bud."

Damian's gaze darted away for half a second before he returned to the usual intense eye contact. "Get on with it, then."

That was fair. Jason hadn't expected this to be a long, or even a

productive conversation. He just wanted to get some perspective, and make sure Damian knew he wasn't being overlooked. "Are you having trouble sleeping?"

"No."

"Then why are you down here?"

"I wanted to train."

"We came up with rules for a reason, Dami." The rules in question were a very loose set of guidelines in an attempt to keep Damian, Tim, and Cass on a semi-normal sleep schedule. "You need sleep, so training is off limits after eight unless you really need it. You've done really well following those rules, so what happened?"

" *Nothing* . The rules are simply pointless. I need to improve my technique, so I need to train. I'll sleep later."

"Or, you can train in the morning," Jason said. "You can get up before school and fit in an hour. Dick or I will even spar with you if you want."

"But I—" Damian cut himself off, head tipping down as if his glare had been turned on himself. He couldn't fight Jason's logic. Training late at night was reserved for coping, and he'd done exactly that.

"How about this?" Jason leaned back, stretching his arms over his head with a yawn. His eyes had begun to get heavy, exhaustion taking its toll on him. "When did it start?" He had a suspicion, but he wanted Damian to tell him.

For a solid few minutes, Damian fought with himself internally. Jason didn't speak. He waited, watching the minute twitches on Damian's face, the only indication of the war raging in his head.

Finally, sounding like the words were squeezed out of him, Damian said, "Tonight."

There it was. The fight in the kitchen. In which Tim had called Damian out on the issue they'd all been skirting around while Dick and Jason tried to figure out how to approach it.

"I can get that. Tonight was a shitshow." Dick wasn't here to frown at his language, and Jason took full advantage of that fact. "Listen. Tim was out of line. I know you know that. I also know you know that you

didn't need to say what you did."

A few moments of silence stretched before Damian finally dipped his head in agreement, the anger suddenly draining from his expression. "What I did was… unreasonable."

Jason nodded, but kept speaking before Damian could start beating himself up. "And most of the time, that's okay. You're twelve. You don't have to be reasonable all the time." He held back a chuckle at Damian's muffled *hmph* . "I'm serious, Dami. But listen. I know you and Tim have some issues to work out."

Like the fact that Tim never fully managed to recover from Damian attacking him in Gotham. Or the fact that Damian, who had gotten slightly attached to Jason in the League, couldn't fathom the idea that Jason already had a little brother, and that it was possible for him to have two.

Shrugging off the memories, Jason continued. "But you've got to learn when you can be mean and when you can't."

Damian raised a brow. "There are times I'm allowed to be mean?"

"Of course! One time I threw Dick out a window." It had been funny, though Bruce nearly had a heart attack.

At the memory of his former dad, Jason's smile dimmed. Thinking about life before the fire…it hurt. A lot.

But that wasn't important right now. What was important was helping Damian. "My point is, you can be mean when it's funny and you know that it won't actually hurt either of you. But other times—like when Tim just had a panic attack—you have to be nice. And if you can't do that, it's better to leave the situation until you can."

Damian sat with those words for a good while. Jason sat with him, trying to fight off the consequences of invoking his past. He'd been so good at blocking it out, recently. It had been months since he last sat on his bed, staring at the wall while his brain conjured flames around him, devouring Jason's second chance as it had his first.

He was so focused that whan Damian spoke, he jumped a little. It didn't go unnoticed: Damian paused, giving him a smug look as if celebrating the victory of staying focused while Jason thought. "I understand, Todd."

“Awesome.” Jason smiled, then added pointedly, “I’m proud of you.” Damian glared, but didn’t argue, so Jason took it as a win. “Now. Sleep, you nighttime hobgoblin.”

“What’s a nighttime hobgoblin?” Damian asked, looking genuinely affronted.

“It’s you,” Jason said, before standing and grabbing Damian around the waist, tossing him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “When you don’t go to bed. So go to bed, or you will be cursed to forever be a tiny goblin wandering the basement in the dark.”

As expected, Damian promptly bit Jason and got himself immediately dropped, but when he stood, the tiniest hint of a smile had softened his features. “Todd, you’re an idiot.”

“So are you,” Jason replied happily. “See? Good time to be mean.” He ruffled Damian’s hair, which the younger boy allowed with great annoyance. “But seriously, go to bed. School’s in like ten hours.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Damian conceded. He unwrapped his wrists and placed the wraps in a small bin next to the washing machine before making his way to the stairs. He paused at the foot of them. “Thank you, Todd.”

“Any time, Dami.” Then, in a highly risky move, Jason held out his arms, offering a hug. Damian hated them. Really, he hated most physical affection, but Jason had always gotten the feeling that it was more due to League trauma than personal preference. Still, he and the rest of the family never forced Damian to make contact with any of them. But it didn’t stop them from offering on occasion.

Jason expected Damian to turn angry again, maybe insult him for being soft before stalking off to his room. So when Damian darted into his arms, giving him the briefest hug known to man, Jason actually yelped. He heard a small laugh, but by then Damian was already racing up the stairs.

Jason let him go, smiling faintly as he turned off the basement lights. Damian really was a good kid. He hoped one day he’d learn to let himself be a happy one, too.

Back in his room, Jason flopped onto his bed once more. Sleep was weighing on his eyelids, but before he succumbed, he reached over

the edge to pull a shoebox out from underneath the mattress. Flipping the top off, he stared down at its contents: college brochures. Tons of them, from Bludhaven University to Oxford. Advertisements of beautiful campuses, assorted extracurriculars, and strong communities looked back, all of them things he couldn't reach.

In Gotham, being dead had suited Jason just fine. Who needed an ID when you were the fucking Red Hood? If anything, it was helpful that there were no records for anyone to trace back to him. He'd never expected that he'd develop a life outside of vigilantism. And now, faced with it…

He realized just how much dying had screwed him over. He had no identity with which to apply to school, obtain a driver's license, get a passport and see the world as nothing more than a tourist. And of course, Jason could get fakes made—he was the *fucking Red Hood* — but in some unnamable, uncomfortable way, the idea made his stomach turn.

False identities were for undercover operations and witness protection. All Jason wanted was to be alive.

Sighing, he put the lid back on the box and shoved it under the bed. *One thing at a time* , he reminded himself. *Help Tim. Help Damian. Then figure your own shit out.*

He rolled over so he was facing the wall and pillowed his head on his hands. Everything would be fine. He had to believe that.

He focused on anything but his life until sleep claimed him.

Chapter 4: Little Bird, Wandering Away

Chapter Notes

> I return after suffering from college applications. Have a fun chapter where things expand!
>
> No CW's for this chapter. Enjoy :)

Tim and Damian always walked into school together. It didn't matter if they'd snapped at each other the night before, or if one was running behind, or if the other tripped on their own shoelaces and looked like an idiot(it hadn't happened. Yet.). Damian stuck close to Tim because he maintained that the rest of the kids in his grade were 'imbeciles', and Tim stuck close to Damian because he was the most familiar face in the building. They'd enter the lobby and go down the hall together. Then Tim would take the first right to go to the high school building, and Damian would continue straight to his homeroom. It was normal. It was routine.

Tim didn't know how that routine would hold up after last night. He'd upset Damian, badly. The whole ride to school, he'd pressed himself up against the car door, staying as far away from Tim as possible, backpack held between his legs. It was like riding next to a wasp—if he got too close, Tim knew he'd be stung.

If that weren't enough of an indicator that something was wrong, Dick was silent the entire drive. Dick was *never* completely silent. There was always some amount of noise from him, whether he was talking, singing, or drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. Cass drove herself to school, so Tim got the passenger seat. Today, it gave him a front row ticket to Dick's tired eyes as he stared straight out at the road. He'd been tired a lot lately. Tim didn't know if he should say anything about it. Maybe he could bring it up with Jason.

Getting out, Tim lingered, pretending to mess with his bag so Damian wouldn't know he was waiting for him. The boy walked around to the sidewalk, and Tim finally slung his bag over his shoulder. His heart beat fast in his chest—he was still pissed at Damian, but the idea of walking alone into school made his insides shrivel up.

Tim took a few steps towards the door.

Damian matched his pace.

Tim exhaled. It was okay. Dick drove away, and he and Damian walked into school. Immediately, Tim was assaulted by sound everywhere. The voices of hundreds of kids bounced off the walls and echoed back into his space. Wincing, Tim took the bulky headphones he wore around his neck and put them on. The chaos turned less head-splitting, and he relaxed minutely. Beside him, Damian's face was set in stony concentration. He forged ahead through the crowd of students, glaring at everyone who happened to make eye contact. Tim followed. Somehow, the sixth grader was more skilled at parting crowds than the sixteen year old who should, by all accounts, have figured out how to take up his own space in the world by now.

They reached Tim's turn. Damian continued on his way without breaking stride, as he always did. Tim paused for half a second, as he always did, then turned and walked down the hall. This corridor of the school was lined with windows. Enough natural sunlight filtered in that the lights in the ceiling didn't get turned on unless it was raining or otherwise dark.

Tim's first class was English. He moved carefully through the sea of students, eyes trained straight ahead, occasionally dodging a clump of friends making their way slowly to their destination. He ducked into the stairwell at the end of the sunny hall, walked past the staircase, and left the building through the side door tucked behind it.

People didn't question kids leaving school much, Tim had figured out. Especially high schoolers. They tended to assume you had permission; that, or you were a Delinquent™, and if they thought that, they usually left you alone while hoping their precious angel of a child wasn't friends with you.

Cutting across the football field, Tim got on the sidewalk a ways away from school and started walking. It took twenty minutes to reach Bright Street, home to a clump of shops and cafes. In the past few months, Tim had spent more time here than at school. Jason and Dick had no idea because, like he had in Gotham, Tim had automated a system to mark him present in the school's logs. It was his job to collect the mail, anyway. He could intercept anything sent his brothers' way if the school happened to notice his trick.

In the absence of a high school education, Tim had found a space in the corner booth of Honeycomb, a small independent bakery/ coffee shop that stayed open for most of the day and made decent money selling baked goods made with honey they farmed themselves. That same honey was also for sale on shelves by the windows in glass jars

with striped blue lids. It was all quite reasonably priced, which had surprised Tim. Most smaller places he'd been to had to put high prices on their merchandise to stay in business.

Then again, that was Gotham. Maybe things were different in the rest of the world.

The people working there didn't mind a high schooler showing up on days when he should've been in school. Tim liked that. He ordered a coffee(no espresso. In the years since they'd moved to Bludhaven, Jason and Dick had convinced him to cut back to a semi-reasonable amount) and a plate of scrambled eggs. The employees had been nice when he asked for plain food. None of the complete meals on their menu were things Tim could eat all of. He offered to pay extra for the trouble, but after coming in a few times they'd told him not to worry about it. So Tim took his coffee back to the booth, and a few minutes later Micah, a waiter, brought him the eggs, and Tim started working.

School taught subjects that Tim found boring. He preferred to spend his time at Honeycomb teaching himself things that would be useful for his night activities—several languages, the structures of numerous explosives, and an extensive knowledge of human anatomy had been added to the database in Tim's head. He was honestly a little proud of it.

For the first few hours, Tim dug around the shitshow from last night. If Fay and Dawes weren't meeting for the Obeah Man, then there had to be another link. Maybe Dawes had done something to anger him, and that was why Fay killed him.

Hacking into both mens' email accounts was a good place to start. Tim was able to do so fairly quickly, but neither Fay nor Dawes had been using their personal emails to communicate. Obviously. They were criminals. Tim should have been looking for something more hidden.

Before he could get all the way into that rabbit hole, though, someone dropped into the seat across from him. "Aren't you failing school yet?"

Barely glancing up, Tim put his laptop away. "I don't need to be there. I already know everything they'll teach me."

Cassie snorted. "If you say so."

Cassie Sandsmark was also sixteen, homeschooled, and probably Tim's best friend. She had chin length blonde hair she'd apparently cut herself at four in the morning during a manic episode, tan skin from

hours spent outside, and wore a thrifted leather jacket she'd bleached Wonder Woman's symbol onto. She was very cool.

Her mother was an archaeologist who traveled all the time for work. She'd decided to homeschool Cassie so she could come with her and they could have an actual bond, instead of sending Cassie to endless boarding schools. It reminded Tim of his parents—what a different version of them could have been.

When Cassie wasn't traveling, she lived in Bludhaven. The trips had tapered off in the past few years, she'd said, so she really had nothing better to do than annoy Tim. Usually, it worked out for him.

He closed his laptop and gave Cassie his full attention. "Is there a particular reason you've decided to sit down today?"

Cassie beamed. "I'm so glad you asked." She changed seats to be next to Tim, making the face she tended to give adults when she wanted something. "You know computers, right?"

Tim raised a brow. No way this went anywhere legal. Not when Cassie was the one asking. "A little bit. Why?"

Cassie's grin turned conspiratorial. "I'll give you fifty bucks if you hack the DEO security cameras."

Tim had long since figured Cassie out as someone who knew things she reasonably shouldn't. He didn't question her. In return, she didn't question that he knew these things too. But asking him to get her a view inside the DEO was a stretch, even for Tim's lenient standards.

"Fifty bucks and a reason." Risky, but worth it. Probably.

Cassie's smile dimmed. "You've never asked before."

"If I get caught doing this, I'll be arrested," Tim replied. These people *could* actually catch him. He wasn't sure how far their reach extended. "I want to know why."

A long silence stretched over the table as Cassie bit her lip, thinking. Tim pushed his half-eaten eggs away and drained the rest of his coffee. His sympathetic nervous system was activating—he felt it. The slightly rubbery sensation in his stomach, his heart rate increasing like he was poised at the top of a roller coaster. Cassie controlled the lever, and Tim was ready to experience the drop.

Finally, she seemed to come to a decision. “Let me make a call.”

So more people were involved. Tim nodded. “Take your time.”

While Cassie went outside, Tim started poking around the edges of the DEO’s system. Nothing wildly intrusive, but he hoped something might reveal itself and give him more information.

No such luck. Tim ended up watching the ruby on Cassie’ earring dangle, occasionally reflecting slivers of light back into his eye. Whoever she was talking to seemed to be wholly consuming her attention. She kept covering one ear and looking around, as though imagining two separate people in the space with her. Five minutes later, she finally hung up with a relieved sigh and came back to the booth. Tim watched her return, eyebrow raised in a silent question.

Cassie didn’t sit back down. “Do you trust me enough to go to a second location? Kind of far away?”

That…sure was a question. Tim didn’t really trust Cassie all that much. He barely knew her outside of their conversations at Honeycomb(which was maybe a little sad, considering she was about his only friend). But…he was bored. And this sounded interesting.

“Sure.” He stood up, packing his computer back into his bag. “How are we getting there?”

Cassie’s eyes sparked mischievously. “It’s a surprise.”

Tim put his dishes in the tray by the wall. “I hate surprises.”

“You might like this one.”

Cassie took him to an alley, and Tim was sure he was about to be murdered for his curiosity. Dick and Jason did tend to compare him to a cat.

As much as he’d love to fulfill that metaphor, Tim got ready to swing his bag if Cassie attacked—before she turned around with a black wig in her hands.

Apparently she’d been hiding it behind the dumpster, in a bag also containing several air fresheners. The wig was shoulder length, cheaply made, but well cared-for and untangled. Cassie pulled her real

hair into a haphazard ponytail and shoved the wig over it. “Good enough.” She held out a hand to Tim. “Come here.”

A few pieces were connecting in Tim’s head to files he’d noticed, both from his own house and the government systems he’d hacked. A few teenagers, connections to Flash, Wonder Woman, and Superman. Two boys, one girl. One girl with medium-length black hair. “What did you say you liked about Wonder Woman again?”

Cassie’s eyes warmed with something resembling pride. “You could call her a family friend.”

With that, she lifted a few inches off the ground, hovering over to Tim with her arm still outstretched. “I don’t need to reintroduce myself, right?”

“Wonder Girl,” Tim confirmed, eyes wide. “You…holy shit.”

Clearly enjoying this, Cassie spun around with a little smirk. “In the flesh. Can we go now? The others are waiting.”

Tim’s anxieties vanished. The dots connecting in his head had resolved themselves into a clear picture: the mostly-League-approved team Impulse, Superboy, and Wonder Girl had formed was doing something the League didn’t want them to.

The fun part: he got to meet new heroes.

The bonus part: he got to spite Bruce.

Tim grabbed Cassie’s hand. “Oh, *hell yeah* .”

Cassie’s smile grew. She hauled Tim up and wrapped her arms around his waist to keep him from falling. “Hold on. We’re about to go very fast and very high.”

Tim dutifully tightened his arms around her neck. No sooner had he done so than Cassie shot up into the sky like a rocket.

The city so large Tim felt like an ant inside it shrank until it looked no bigger than a quarter as the ground fell away. Blood rushed in Tim’s ears as his stomach dropped, and all he could feel was total elation.

God, he wished he could fly.

Cassie spared him a quick glance to make sure he hadn’t puked or anything, then shifted her hold to be a little more secure and shouted,

“Five minutes!” Tim nodded, and she sped off, Bludhaven dropping away behind them as they rocketed into the horizon.

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